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SUBJECT: ALBANIA RECEIVES MIXED REVIEWS FROM NATO ALLIES ON ITS ANNUAL NATIONAL PROGRAM

REF: SECSTATE 169370

Classified By: Charge Richard Olson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY. Albania received qualified praise from NATO Allies for its implementation of political and defense reforms and admonitions to quicken its reform pace during an October 10 meeting with NATO's Senior Political Committee/Reinforced. During the meeting, in which Albania presented its Annual National Program (ANP) outlining planned reforms for the upcoming year as part of NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP), Allies commended Albania's contributions to NATO operations, high public support for NATO membership, and progress in defense reforms. Allies expressed concerns about crime and corruption, aligning defense priorities with resources, improving the electoral process, and improving relations between the government and opposition. The Albanian delegation expressed its hope that NATO's November Summit would send an encouraging message to NATO aspirants, while most allies stressed that membership was a performance-based process and urged Albania to increase the pace of its reforms. The U.S. praised Albania's progress and its contributions to NATO while also noting time was short to make additional progress before the Alliance would consider issuing membership invitations in 2008, and expressed concern about the quality of some sections of Albania's ANP. The next step in the MAP process for Albania will be a February visit by NATO International Staff to Albania to assess implementation of the planned reforms. END SUMMARY.

ALBANIA: NATO MEMBERSHIP A FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITY

¶12. (C) Albanian Deputy Minister of Defense Petrit Karabina led an interagency delegation that presented Albania's 2006-2007 Annual National Program (ANP) to NATO's Senior Political Committee/Reinforced on October 10. Karabina stressed that NATO membership was one of the main pillars of Albania's foreign policy and served as an impetus for domestic reforms. He emphasized Albania's contributions to NATO operations, such as Operation Active Endeavor in the Mediterranean and ISAF in Afghanistan. On the domestic front, he said human rights standards for minorities continue to improve and that the Albanian government was engaged in updating the legal and administrative framework to further improve conditions for free and fair elections. Karabina said the Albanian government had demonstrated its political will and determination to fight organized crime, corruption, and trafficking through its record of arrests and prosecutions.

¶3. (C) Karabina said Albania would focus its reform efforts over the next year on strengthening the judicial system, fighting corruption and organized crime, combating the illicit traffic of drugs and human beings, and the struggle against terrorism. Defense reforms would focus on adjusting priorities to meet resources, transforming the armed forces through enhanced training and modernization programs, phasing out conscription, and increasing the annual defense budget with the goal of meeting NATO's informal target of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense by 2010.

ALLIES ENCOURAGING, BUT STRESS NEED TO DO MORE

¶4. (C) In response, almost all Allies expressed general support for Albania's NATO membership aspirations. The majority voiced appreciation for Albania's contributions to international peacekeeping operations and welcomed progress in implementing reforms outlined in the ANP, especially noting progress in defense reforms. The U.S. praised Albania's progress and its contributions to NATO, noted time was short to make additional progress before the Alliance would consider issuing membership invitations in 2008, and expressed concern about the quality of Albania's ANP which was vague and difficult to understand in parts. Concerns expressed by Allies focused on the need for more progress in the fight against crime and corruption (SK, GM, FR, NO, RO, NL, US), in aligning defense priorities with spending (PO, UK), in improving political dialogue between the opposition and government (GM, SP, UK, NO), and in improving the electoral process (FR, SP).

¶5. (C) Greece and Iceland stressed the need for improvements in the treatment of minorities. Karabina said Albania was committed to the highest international standards

for the protection of minority rights and noted that Greek PM Karamanlis had praised Albania for its good performance on minority issues when he met recently with Albanian PM Berisha.

VIEWS ON RIGA LANGUAGE

¶6. (C) Karabina said he hoped the communique from the November NATO Summit would define a clear calendar for NATO enlargement and hoped to receive an invitation to join the Alliance at the 2008 NATO Summit. Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the U.S. said that the message to NATO aspirants in the Riga communique should be encouraging, but stressed that admittance is a performance-based process. France hoped the communique would send a strong and clear signal that pointed to a "precise point of reference in the future." The Netherlands said further reform would be needed for Albania to qualify for membership.

DEFENSE REFORMS GET PASSING GRADE

¶7. (C) Defense reforms were given an overall passing mark by Allies. Poland acknowledged Tirana's slow but steady growth in defense spending, while Italy was glad to see increases to the defense budget. When asked whether Tirana realistically thought they could reach their goal of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense by 2010, the Albanian delegation responded that the numbers had been approved by the government, which was committed to that goal.

¶8. (C) Germany, France and The Netherlands all said that good progress was being made in defense reforms, though Germany noted that the size and structure of the Albanian Armed Forces (AAF) must come from Tirana's own strategic documents. The UK saluted Albania's ambition and noted "radical changes" were being made with the "wiping out" of fixed wing aircraft and the removal of conscription. Karabina stated that Albania's MiGs would be decommissioned and the government was currently looking to set a price for potential bidders. Romania commented that efforts to professionalize the AAF were going well. Albanian Director of the General Staff Colonel Foto Duro noted conscription would be reduced step by step and the armed forces would be

fully professional by 2010. Several Allies were concerned about the excess amount and disposal of surplus weapons and ammunition. The Netherlands worried these weapons could fall into terrorists' hands, and suggested Albania speed up their destruction. Duro explained that Albania had inherited large quantities of excess equipment and ammunition, which were increasing as they reduced the reserve forces. He noted the goal was to destroy approximately 13 to 14 tons per year, though he admitted there had been a drop in the scheduled amount to be destroyed this year.

ASSESSMENT IN FEBRUARY

¶9. (C) In concluding the meeting, NATO Assistant SYG Martin Erdmann said that the NATO International Staff would visit Albania on February 7th to begin its annual assessment of Albania's progress in implementing the reforms outlined in its ANP.

OLSON